

[**After the End of the World**](#) by [**orphan_account**](#)

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Characters: Dustin Henderson, Eddie Kaspbrak, Eleven | Jane Hopper, James (Stranger Things), Jim "Chief" Hopper, Jonathan Byers, Joyce Byers, Lucas Sinclair, Maxine "Max" Mayfield, Mike Wheeler, Nancy Wheeler, Richie Tozier, Steve Harrington, Troy (Stranger Things), Will Byers

Relationships: Eleven | Jane Hopper & Mike Wheeler, Eleven | Jane Hopper/Mike Wheeler, Joyce Byers & Jim "Chief" Hopper, Joyce Byers/Jim "Chief" Hopper, Will Byers & Mike Wheeler, Will Byers & Richie Tozier, Will Byers/Mike Wheeler, Will Byers/Richie Tozier

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Summary:

Of all the demons Will Byers had to face, his thoughts were the worst. Every haunted memory plagued his mind and he had nothing left to live for but moments of numbness. Then Richie Tozier came to town and Will found himself pulled toward the tortured boy with an inexplicable magnetism. Finally having someone to understand his trauma seemed like a blessing, but Will would soon find that cheap thrills come at a cost.

*I primarily post this on savingacadia.tumblr.com, but I like being complimented and it seems like there are more people on here, so tell me I'm good.

1. Chapter One

After coming out, the last place Will Byers expected to be hiding was the closet. Yet here he was, snuggled into the familiar warmth of his best friend's sweaters. He tried his best to breathe silently, each inhalation infused with the lingering smell of Mike. It intoxicated his brain and sent tingles rushing from his head to his toes. Will cautiously laid his hands on the rough closet doors in front of him and rested his forehead on the door. He closed one eye as the other peered out the narrow space between the white bifold doors. He saw Mike's room as it had always been. Dark clothing was strewn across every inch, his textbooks thrown carelessly into a mountain at the foot of the bed. Papers of scribbled notes were thoughtlessly scattered across every surface. The clutter never bothered Will. It was almost comforting, like he was seeing the inside of Mike's creative mind spread across his room. Will was startled as muffled voices approached. He heard the door latch open aggressively, and suddenly the once muffled voices flooded the room with violent volume.

"Richie, I warned you about this!" Mike yelled as he tromped over the clothing, dropping his decaying backpack off his shoulder and discarding it somewhere in the mess. Richie came in following a footstep behind him like a shadow, tripping as his feet became ensnared in a long forgotten sweatshirt. He was trapped in place, cursing under his breath as he attempted to free his awkward limbs. Mike crossed the room with heavy steps.

"Come on, Mikey boy! Chare up. 'av a pint! 'tis not so brutal, me lad," Richie urged in his Irish cop voice as he shook one lanky leg in an attempt to rid himself of the sweatshirt. Will watched as Mike froze where he stood, stone cold with anger. Mike clenched his hands into fists and locked his jaw with painful strength in an attempt to keep himself from letting them loose on his cousin.

"Stop doing that!" He burst, pivoting on one foot to face his rival. "Richie, all you've done since you got here is open that fucking trash

mouth of yours. You made El uncomfortable, and when I asked you to tone it down you just got worse. I told you not to provoke Troy, and what did you do? I told you to leave Will alone, and you decided that meant to flirt and toy with his emotions.” Mike ranted. Richie suddenly dropped his composure. His ribcage collapsed and Will could see he was just awkward, guilty Richie for a moment. Mike took a deep breath, rolled his eyes and added, “And I told you to stop fucking smoking in my room!”

Richie dropped one hand to his side and rubbed his neck with the other and began uncomfortably, “Well, you know-”

“Yeah, I know,” Mike cut him off, “You and your voices.” Mike looked at the ground and shook his head, his voice calming as he ran out of steam to argue. “Your stupid voices,” Mike muttered to himself as he crossed his arms. Mike closed himself off in that moment, disappointment and frustration burning out his energy to be present in the argument. Even staring at the brown curls at the back of his head, Will could feel the hurt welling in Richie’s eyes.

“Well it’s not my fault your friends can’t take a joke!” Richie claimed defensively, finally kicking away the navy sweatshirt he’d been trapped in. Will watched as Richie stumbled forward, trying to get to Mike. He reached out a hand and Mike spun around stomping toward the exit. The tension between the two boys was unbearable. They both meant well, but they interacted with the world in such different ways. While Mike took control of the world around him, the silent and gentle leader, Richie yelled ill-advised humor at it. They both had their share of pent-up anger for everything life had unfairly thrown at them, but they dealt with it in such contrasting ways.

Will jumped back from the closet doors, shrinking back into the soft clothing as he saw Mike stampeding in his direction. Mike irritably mumbled with no direction, “I’m not doing this with you right now.”

“Mike, wait,” Richie plead as he did a little anxious hop where Mike

had previously stood. He began to chase after Mike once again, tripping over the mountain of textbooks in the process and falling onto his hands with a loud smack. "Mike!" Richie called as he blundered back to his feet. "Mike you can't—"

Will heard the door slam shut again as the voices hurried away. He took a deep breath to cleanse his racing mind. Once again the smell of Mike made him woozy. Will stood frozen in the closet for a moment, attempting to comprehend everything he had just been through.

Just like every Friday, the party had intended on meeting at Mike's after school, and just like every Friday El was stuck late in class because she just had so many questions to ask. She was a few years behind the rest of the party, but she never stopped learning. She was fascinated and stuck on every detail. It annoyed her teachers more than anything, but she wasn't caught up on conventional knowledge like the rest of the class, so every assertion the teacher made was followed by a contradictory question from El, and every contradictory question from El was met by an irritable sigh by her teacher. She meant no harm, she just had a different way of understanding the world, one that no classmate could begin to comprehend. Mike stood casually outside the door of El's class to wait for her. Meanwhile, Max was out in the high school parking lot bravely skating through the after-school traffic and yelling insults at Lucas and Dustin who were pretending they weren't desperately searching the ground for the car keys they'd lost. So just like every Friday, Will turned up to the Wheeler household early.

Though ill-advised, Will knew from experience that the Wheelers rarely kept their house locked. To be fair they lived in a nice suburban neighborhood, and the threats in Hawkins tended to be a bit more supernatural than thievery. So Will calmly turned the fancy golden door knob and let himself into the pristine front entry of Mike's home. He unfastened the velcro strap at the ankle of his knock-off sneakers and began to loosen the black laces, as per the rules of such a well-kept home. His shoes that had once been white, but now were yellowing with age and love, seemed such a stark contrast to the clean entry as he kicked them off with his toes. Before

he could comprehend what was happening, Richie came violently bounding down the stairs only to stop in his tracks with one arm behind his back when he saw Will. Richie's eyes were wide in the magnification of his coke bottle glasses as he stared at Will, his loose Hawaiian swinging forward around his frozen sides with the sudden change in momentum.

"Oh, it's you," Richie stated simply with a shrug before starting right back upstairs as quickly as he had come down. Will slowly finished kicking off his shoes as he stared at the stairs in confusion at the strange interaction he'd just encountered. His daze was broken when Richie called down in his British butler voice, "Pip pip, cheerio. Won't you join me, my good lad?"

Will shook his flustered head and blinked a few times. Though he was unsure, Will was intrigued, and he slowly began dragging himself up one stair at a time after Richie. The first thing that caught him was the smell wafting down the stairway, making his nose itch. When he reached the top step, Will found Richie standing in the doorway of Mike's bedroom. Richie leaned on the doorframe with his arms crossed, a cigarette hanging lazily from his lips and one leg propped up behind him. Richie examined Will for a moment, looking him up and down before simply walking into Mike's room with no explanation. Will hesitated to follow. Richie could be unpredictable, and Will wasn't sure if he could trust this Derry boy. Will could feel the blood rushing through his veins, his pulse heightening as he considered just ignoring Richie and heading back down to wait for his friends. Will nodded to himself, nibbling at his lip in contemplation. That seemed to be the safe decision.

"What? You go back to the fucking future, Marty McFly?!" Richie obnoxiously yelled out from the bedroom.

Will looked down at his orange vest, suddenly feeling very self-conscious about it. He wasn't sure if it was the shame or just his own irresistible curiosity that drew him in, but he found himself quietly obeying the demands of Richie. When he stepped into Mike's room,

Will saw Richie sprawled across Mike's bed, blowing smoke up into the air. Will grabbed at his own forearm anxiously as he tentatively sat beside Richie. The peculiar boy clumsily sat himself up beside Will. Richie held out the cigarette lazily toward Will, and Will pinched his eyes shut tightly, cringing as Richie exhaled sweet smoke into his face. Will opened his eyes cautiously and found himself staring at the cigarette in fear. It wasn't the cigarette itself that petrified him. His mother had smoked his whole life, and though he had never thought of doing it himself, Will saw no problem with the matter of smoking. It was that it was Richie's cigarette that sent shivers down Will's spine and froze him in terror. He chanced a glance up at Richie, who silently responded by raising his eyebrows and shoving the cigarette closer to Will. To his surprise, Will watched his hand reach out and linger at Richie's offering. It was as if he was watching someone else control his body. Will took the stick, trembling so violently that he nearly dropped it as he slowly brought it to his mouth. He closed his eyes tightly and inhaled deeply. He opened his eyes wide as the realization of his mistake hit him, the feeling of black poison swirling in his stomach. He attempted to stifle his coughing fit in embarrassment as Richie watched on laughing.

"You don't swallow it, dickhead. Here," Richie began, leaning over and took the cigarette from Will. "You've got to breathe it in shallow, like this," Richie brought the cigarette to his smooth lips and inhaled blissfully. He took the stick away from his mouth and after a moment blew the smoke at Will like he was blowing a kiss, smirking behind the mischievous grey cloud. "You just kind of hold it in your mouth for a minute, and then let it go," Richie explained casually as he shoved the cigarette back at Will. Will carefully took the cigarette in his steady fingers, his terror suddenly replaced by his irrational determination to redeem himself. He did as Richie taught, sucking in the smoke as if it were a straw in a coke. He paused a moment, waiting for the cloud to cool in his mouth before carelessly breathing it out toward the floor. Will stared at the bedroom door, his head off in space as he handed the cigarette back toward Richie.

They continued like this for a while, silently passing the dwindling cigarette back and forth until Will felt a jolt of confidence and

comfort. He turned toward Richie and blurted out, “Why are we in Mike’s room?”

Richie shrugged, not meeting his eyes. He huffed out smoke like dragon’s breath, immediately going for another desperate drag. “I’m disposable,” Richie explained. “Already got kicked out of my own house. Probably better if I don’t lose this one too. Aunt Karen’s never going to let Mike go now that Nancy’s left for college, so who’s it gonna hurt if she thinks Mike’s smoking instead of me?” Before he could stop himself Richie added, “And Uncle Ted doesn’t have the first fucking idea what goes on in this house,” as he handed off the cigarette to Will. Will nodded, taking another blissful drag. He felt it invade his body, valiantly breaking apart the tension and fear in every nerve and calming him with a nicotine lullaby.

Their calm was interrupted when they heard the front door struggling to be opened. “Shit!” Richie spat out, jumping off the bed and turning to Will. “Warden’s home.” Richie snatched the last of the cigarette from Will’s grasp and shoved him toward the closet, effectively knocking Will over in the process. Richie quickly and carelessly put the cigarette out on the closet door, leaving a disturbing black scar on the white paint. He opened it in desperation, vigorously gesturing for Will to get in. Will wasn’t sure why he allowed himself to follow every command Richie gave him, but he clambered to his feet and walked into the closet without argument. Will watched fearfully as Richie closed the doors on him, shutting Will off from the rest of the world.

Will was jolted out of his reverie when the closet doors clattered about, opening to reveal Richie struggling with the contraption. Richie kicked stray clothing out of the way in an attempt to free Will from the comfort of being alone in the small closet. “They’re in the basement,” Richie commented passively as he grappled with the door. Will nodded, feeling a pang of guilt for reasons he couldn’t understand. He took small steps and stared at the floor as he exited the closet, walking past Richie who was ushering him out of the room. Will reached the top step of the stairway and nervously

glanced back to see Richie slamming his bedroom door behind him, loudly shaking his obnoxious metal signs. In the center lived a red and black “Keep Out” sign, below which was an old, beat up street sign that read “Neibolt”. Both signs were weathered and Will had half a sense to say Richie was mischievous enough to have stolen them right off their posts. They were poorly nailed to the white door that used to house Nancy’s bedroom. It seemed much less welcoming now, Will concluded as he turned back to the stairs.

He felt relief wash over him like a fresh rain when he laid eyes on his friends in the basement. Lucas had Dustin in a headlock while Dustin swung his arms around wildly trying to get free. Max rolled her eyes at them as she closed the mini fridge and crossed the room with a can of soda in either hand. She tossed one to El who was snuggled up to Mike on the couch. El’s eyes locked on the soda and she mentally guided it to the table in front of her. She smiled in pride at her accomplishment while Max threw herself down on the couch next to El. Will smiled at the misfit behavior of his friends as he finished descending the stairs into the warmly lit basement. He was greeted with excited cheers of his name and familiar smiles from each of his friends.

“You’re late!” Mike teased as he gestured Will over to the couch with the hand that was not wrapped around El. “Normally you’re sitting here waiting for us,” Mike elaborated, a flash of concern flying across his face. Will sat next to Max on the couch attempting to stumble out an excuse.

“Well I-“

“Have you been smoking?” Max blurted out as she furrowed her fiery eyebrows at Will. “You reek.”

Will shrunk under her accusations, suddenly very aware of the smoke laced in his clothing, hair, and every inch of exposed skin. “I- Um.. it’s just...” Will stuttered, looking around at the concerned and

critical expressions on each of his friend's faces in horror. "I—"

"It was Richie," Mike vomited, cutting off Will's pathetic rambling. Mike stared through Will's eyes and straight into his soul with a look of hurt confusion. Mike's eyes didn't leave Will's as he added, "Must have drifted down here when Will came in."

Will felt guilt welling up in the pit of his stomach as his best friend covered for him. Mike's eyes searched Will's face for any sign of life, but Will just looked so dead all the time. Will couldn't tell if Mike knew for sure what had happened, but he'd be a fool if he couldn't read the suspicion plaguing every feature of Mike's face. The room was awkwardly silent as the group stared at the invisible tension between Mike and Will. Will was afraid to close his eyes, but all he wanted was to blink it all away. The answer to his prayers came when Dustin piped up.

"You guys will never guess what I brought," Dustin claimed using his arm for emphasis as he backed away from the group. He turned around and excitedly unzipped his backpack to reveal his multitude of video game cartridges crammed in amongst the decaying textbooks.

"Sweet man, what've you got?" Max asked excitedly as she jumped up from the couch and crossed over to him. They began sorting through the pale grey cartridges together as Lucas turned to make judgements about each game Dustin owned. Eleven stood up in her gentle way and floated over to where the decisions were being made, leaving Mike and Will alone on the couch together.

Will chanced a glance to his right, and regrettably Mike's confused stare had not moved from Will's face. Will looked down and nervously pulled at each shaky finger on his hand. He wasn't sure why he felt so guilty. It wasn't like he had done anything wrong. Whether or not he chose to smoke was none of Mike's concern. Smoking in Mike's room was a little uncalled for, he'd give Mike that, but Richie was going to be smoking there with or without Will. He knew Mike, though not Richie's biggest fan in the world, wouldn't

ever judge him for who he hung out with. Will supposed it was himself that he felt guilty for, or rather his lack of existence. He was so numb and so dead to the world all the time. Quite simply, Will had nothing left to live for. That's the kind of thing PTSD can do to a person he supposed. When every waking moment is a custom-made torture poisoning your brain, there's not much point in existing. Will breathed as he began to understand. He had nothing left in the world to wake him up but cheap thrills.

“You have the new Super Mario Brothers?!” Max exclaimed, her warm hair drifting behind her as she ran across the basement with the hunk of grey plastic. She shoved it into the Nintendo Entertainment System that lived below the boxy television set, bouncing with excitement. Max sat in awe as the pixel filled screen lit up her face and reflected in her bright blue eyes.

“Me first!” El exclaimed in her child-like glee, running to the lively television. Her earthy plaid shirt flowed behind her like a cape as she plopped herself down next to Max, who was scooting back to view the entire television, tiny grey controller in hand. Max started the game, then casually passed the controller off to Eleven, who began bashing buttons passionately as the 8-bit figure fought it's way across the blue screen. Her tongue poked just slightly out of the corner of her mouth as she bit it in concentration. El leaned closer to the screen as the obstacles became more difficult as if she could will the characters to do her bidding with an intense stare.

“Jumpjumpjumpjump!” The entire party erupted as a tiny pink enemy raced toward El’s character.

“Look out!” Max screamed, pointing a finger at the screen as the two figures clashed. Eleven’s character began flashing on the screen as she huffed and passed the game controller to Max. The party continued to change turns whenever someone lost a life, all laughing and screaming at each other as their eyes locked onto the fast-paced action on screen.

During Mike's turn Will decided to take a peek at Mike while he was distracted. He saw the former tension and concern on Mike's face replaced with a youthful smile that just grew brighter with age. His eyes were wide with intent and focus. Will felt comfort in knowing his friends could so easily forget his peculiarity and act as though nothing had ever happened. He hated being treated like he was broken, it forced him to feel like he was doing something wrong. It made him feel like they were overreacting, which made him feel as though he was just being dramatic and he couldn't understand why he couldn't just turn it off and be okay. After all, he survived didn't he? Somehow surviving seemed like too little and yet too much to ask of Will these days. He couldn't explain to them what went on in his brain. It was impossible for anyone to understand without having experienced trauma like Will had known. El came close, but she was different. Eleven had never known a world outside of the lab until she escaped. She still had nightmares and episodes of panic, but it was because she was afraid of her past. Will, however, had known a world full of hope and friendship before being ripped away from it by a figure of darkness. Then he came back and just had to adjust back to a life he could never see in the same light. It was intolerable.

2. Chapter Two

Will tossed back the pills like they were candy, a sickening sweet distraction from his bitter life. He washed them down harshly with painful gulps of water, slamming down his empty glass loudly on the table as he dropped his head to his chest and desperately gasped for air. His messy hair drooped into his eyes, causing them to water and blink uncontrollably. Will gripped the top of the kitchen chair before him with his trembling hands until his knuckles turned white, praying for the sweet relief of medication to pollute his brain and take him away from his terror. The kitchen was dark and cold. It seemed so still and lifeless at night, a comforting contrast to Will's panic. He ended up in this desolate place most nights. It was a relief of sorts, knowing that he was awake. Will was afraid to sleep. The bad dreams just got worse, each night his brain adapting and finding new ways to terrify him more than the last. It had become so bad that he woke up most nights from choking on his tongue, only to find himself shaking wildly like he was having a seizure. He was almost thankful for this dangerous habit as it tore him away from his horrifying night terrors. The doctors told Will that four hours of sleep a night was a problem, but he thought four hours was more than enough torture for one night. He was perfectly satisfied waking up at ungodly hours of the morning if it meant he simply could drug himself on alprazolam and avoid sleeping again until it was forced upon him with his heavy sedatives the next night.

Will caught his breath briefly and gently brought his hands to his face, feeling for the tear streaks he knew would be there. When they first started appearing across his tired face, Will had assumed they were simply a result of normal sleep. It had to be that his eyes just watered in his sleep to keep hydrated. He knew better now. Will knew that these streaks were not normal, and they were not a mere systems check run by his body to ensure his eyes produced enough water overnight. Will cried in his sleep. He didn't know what over. He couldn't remember a single dream by the time he woke up, only that it was killing him slowly, suffocating him with his own muscles the moment he laid himself vulnerable. To erase the evidence of his tortured sleep, Will carefully rubbed his face with his soft and shaky fingertips as he steadied his trembling breath. He closed his eyes and

leaned his face into the palms of his hands, exhaling as he dragged them across his eyes and into his distraught hair, tugging at the fragile skin of his temples. He lightly tangled his fingers into the oily strands for a moment before dropping his sore arms to dangle at his sides.

Will decided now was as good a time as any to prepare for the long Monday ahead of him. He ran the shower cold, and the icy water burned him as it washed away the cold sweat he had broken out in during his rest. Will liked the cold. It made him feel present and heightened his awareness, and in time it numbed him to the point he felt he existed outside his heavy body. Will sat down in the unlit shower, falling in love with the deprivation of his overwhelmed senses. Like turning off the engine of a car, Will felt his brain shut down all at once as the medication kicked in. Suddenly his head felt weightless as if it could float right off his shoulders. His muscles became desensitized and Will wondered if he could even stand in his drowsy state. Carefully he ran his fingers down his arm, past his wrist, and into the palm of his hand, hypnotized by the sensation of his nervous system being muted. A calm washed over him and he tilted his head back, letting the shower pour over him like a rain of freedom.

Around 6:30 in the morning Will heard the sound of weathered tires crunching over the gravel outside. He sighed as he stared at the sketch he'd been working on, a colorless rose with black blood dripping off its petals and down its thorny stem, pooling at the bottom as the flower decayed. Will didn't want to stop making tiny adjustments to get it exactly how he wanted it, the sketching calmed him, and it stole the pressure and thoughts from his brain and bled them out onto the paper, it cleansed him. Will inhaled deeply as he stood up from the sketch and walked over to the front door to let Hopper and Eleven in. They came around every morning for a makeshift family breakfast. It started shortly after El began public school. Joyce and Hopper were both single parents without the funds or resources for more than a bike as transportation. It put both Hopper and Joyce at ease to know that Will and El had each other for protection, so the two began biking to school together in the early weekday mornings. Soon, Hopper began giving Joyce rides to work on his way to the station as it was only practical, and eventually their

morning ritual of all joining for breakfast emerged. Will opened the front door wide to reveal El jumping out of the passenger side of Hopper's truck and swinging her antique backpack, an old army bag she found while cleaning, over her tired shoulder. El smiled gently when she looked up to meet Will's restless eyes. Dead leaves crackled under her feet as she casually strolled across the lawn to the house, Hopper only a couple steps behind her as he lectured her.

"It's their job to teach. That's what they're there to do. You ask every last one of those goddamn questions, and if they have a problem with that they're just pissed they actually have to do their job," Hopper explained to El as they stepped through the doorway, Jim giving a slight nod of acknowledgement to Will as he removed his hat and hung it on a hook in the entry. Will wordlessly followed the two of them around the corner into the kitchen. "They try to give you detention for asking questions you come to me. They're going to have hell to pay. You got that?" Hopper inquired as he leaned on the table pointed a serious finger at El across from him.

Eleven pulled her lips into a tight smile and gave a gentle nod of understanding to the protective man before her. Hopper huffed in satisfaction and turned away to being digging through cabinets for cooking utensils. El dropped her book bag on the floor where she stood and raided the utensil drawer, clanking through the silverware as she collected four sets. Will took this as a signal, and began withdrawing four heavy stone plates from the high cupboard above his head. As the two got to work setting the table together, Will could hear the sizzling of eggs and bacon being thrown into a frying pan and was soon met with the wafting scent of grease.

Will turned to glance over his shoulder as he carefully set down another plate, seeing his mother who had finally emerged from preparing for her day at work. "Good morning," Joyce chirped. She seemed so gleeful in the mornings when Hopper came around. Will could see the chemistry between them, and he knew there was history, and yet they chose to remain friends. Still, Will often felt as though El was his sister, and Hopper was the only paternal figure he felt he had in his life. Legal or not, Will loved his makeshift family. It was untraditional, and Will found comfort in that dysfunction. After all, none of them had been intended for a normal suburban family.

anyway. “Smells great, Hop!” Joyce complemented with a gentle smile as she made her way to the toaster to help prepare family breakfast. Will watched his mother and Hopper exchange bashful glances as he set down the last of the plates.

Will took his place next to El at the small wooden table as Hopper began to load up each plate with scrambled eggs and a couple strips of perfectly cooked bacon. Joyce came over with a stack of buttered toast on a small plate and placed it in the center of the table as she sat down across from Will. Hopper as last took his seat beside Joyce with a gruff grunt and they all dug into their food like animals. As they ate, Hopper began to retell a tale from work in which an old confused woman drove her car through the front windows of the local pharmacy.

“We got there are she still had her foot on the gas pedal. The only thing keeping her from going on a rampage was the display shelf she had run into. So I get on the scene and I tell her, ‘Ma’am, you need to turn off the car.’”

“What? I don’t know how to turn it off. How do I turn it off? It’s brand new,” El replied in her best crotchety old lady impression, obviously excited about helping act out the story she had been told the night prior. Will and Joyce exchanged a look and giggled at the play being performed for them.

“Okay, then unlock the door and I’ll turn it off for you,” Hopper offered, holding his hand out toward El as though she could reach out and grab the proposition out of his hand.

El pretended to look around her chair in confusion before looking up at Hopper and bleating, “How do I unlock it?”

“Just pull the door lock up-”

“THE WHAT?” El continued, barely able to keep from laughing as she pretended to be a crazy old lady who was hard of hearing. Will jumped at the sudden increase in volume, then immediately cracked up.

“THE LOCK!” Hopper exclaimed back over the growing laughter

taking over the kitchen table.

“Oh, the lock... Where is it?” El looking at Hopper and attempting a deadpan face, though Will could see her lips twitching, trying to form a smile that would break her character.

“It’s right THERE,” Hopper replied, gesturing to the invisible lock on the make-believe door that separated him and El.

“WHERE?” El squealed back in mock confusion.

Shaking his head in disbelief at the woman who bought a car she was unable to operate, Hopper repeated, “On the- It’s on the door!” He found himself unable to maintain a straight face at this point and wheezed the last of the line out through his chuckling. By now the entire table was in stitches at the hilarious recreation of these ridiculous events and El was wiping a tear from her eye, causing Hopper to snicker to the point he was barely breathing and turned red in the face, which in turn caused the rest of the table to laugh even harder. When the room began to quiet down and the energy began to slow, Hopper finally took a couple moments to calm his laughter, then finished, “We finally got her to unlock the car, and I had to throw the door open and drag her out so I could turn the key and shut the damn engine off. Hell, did she do a number to that pharmacy.”

As Joyce and Jim stayed back to clear the dishes, Will and Eleven braved the bite of the autumn air and walked around to the shed in the backyard to find where they had stashed their bikes. El swung the weathered wood door wide open to reveal their battered cycles. Will’s bike was the same it had always been, the same small beaten up silver frame with extreme amounts of duct tape holding the seat together. However, sitting next to El’s bike it looked like a king. No one was quite sure what about the rusted bike had appealed to El. She had managed to find a Schwinn Black Phantom from 1949 at a garage sale shortly after her reintroduction to the world. Hopper told El it was a piece of junk. The wheels squeaked whenever they moved, the black and red paint was left in horrid chips surrounded by visions of the mud grey metal underneath, and the bike was huge. Yet El insisted she could manage the monster, so Hopper bought it for her from Old Man Flappy Jaw, as he was known to the small town of

Hawkins, at the stiff price of fifteen dollars. It took the party a lot of work helping her learn to ride a bike, nonetheless power her huge Schwinn. They spent weeks out on the street in the evening, guiding El around on her bike until she could just barely wobble it on her own. She came home with new scrapes and bruises every night and still she insisted she would conquer the monstrous Schwinn. It was late July by the time El found herself flying down to the end of Mike's street all by herself, a smile of overjoyed achievement shining from her face. The party had a race to celebrate El's achievement and Will gloriously took the title, proudly claiming Dustin's cartridge of Final Fantasy for a week as his reward. That was the last time any of them would out bike El. Once she got the hang of riding the monstrosity, she was able to edge past every last one of them with ease on her trusty rust bucket. Sometimes it seemed almost as if she had a bond with that bike, a vow of freedom that made her feel untouchable as the wind swept her short brunette hair behind her and whistled in her ears. Will sometimes thought he understood why she felt such a connection to that bike. It was her get away if anyone ever came after her again, and she would sooner die than be stolen away from the beautiful life she had built for herself in Hawkins, and Will knew better than anyone how important it was to run and hide when the need became dire.

Will watched as El mounted her giant phantom and unsteadily wobbled left and right as she started peddling. Quickly, Will hopped on his own bike and began peddling furiously to keep from losing her once she hit full speed and flew away from all earthly things. They got down the gravel drive and once they turned off onto the smoothly paved road, El's bike steadied out to balanced rotations and she risked swinging her head around to yell back, "RACE YOU!" Will smiled at her proposition and found it immediately reflected in El's eager face before she intently spun back to watch the road. Will leaned towards his handlebars in determination and began peddling harder, despite knowing that every morning they did this, and not once had Will won. Still, he enjoyed the thrill of the game, and he loved the joy it provided El. Watching her race on that bike was like watching someone dive into a wave of pure bliss, so Will ran himself out of breath as he put every ounce of himself into the race. A metallic taste formed at the back of his tongue as they flew down Mirkwood. Will tensed up out of subconscious habit, but he felt at

ease when he was with El. They rode so fast Will felt like the world was a blur. The trees, the suburbs, the passing cars, they were all accidental smudges in his peripheral like the world around him was a mistake. Will could have spent the rest of his life in these mornings with El, projecting forward like the world was a myth and their shared existence was the only reality that mattered, but moments were fleeting and they had to arrive at school eventually.

El took her feet off the dangerous pedals and drove her bike into the grassy soccer field on the side of the school to slow her momentum, at the speeds she reached there was no such thing as just braking. She shoved her heels into the freshly cut grass and dug out two parallel trails of dirt as she halted. Clumps of soil flew off her old Chuck Taylors as El awkwardly swung her jean-clad leg over the titan bike. She casually walked the monster back toward Will at the bike rack, loud squeaks of exertion sounding from the wheels with every rotation. Will tidily planted his front wheel in the first space of the rack as he noted that they would have to oil her wheels again or he was going to be stuck listening to that bike scream for the rest of the week. El pulled up and clumsily heaved her bike over the bar. It was clear the bike was too large and awkward for the bike rack, and it proved it every morning when it went crashing down on top of Will's. The kickstand on the bike was rusted in place, so as per usual El just shrugged as she looked at the heap of pedals and metal, turning on her foot lightly to head toward the main entrance. Will chuckled and shook his head at El's blasé passiveness before jogging to catch up with her, following close behind her eager stride.

The party always met around Mike's locker in the morning before classes. El sped her stride to an excited run when her boyfriend drifted into view, She crashed into Mike, embracing him in a heartwarming hug as he picked up her petite form and let her legs dangle for a moment before carefully setting her down like a precious lily whose white petals were apt to tear. Will smiled at their innocent affection as he approached, the warmth of compassion flushing his skin, and yet the pang of loneliness ramming into his ribs. Mike released El and began struggling with his defective locker as he fought to retrieve his textbooks. Will fought the muscles of his face to keep from forming an amused smile as Mike restlessly jiggled the dumb metal contraption. In frustration, he released the handle that

refused to lift and suddenly smashed the back of his fist into the metal door where a visible dent was forming. Will found himself giggling outwardly at Mike's ever-present short fuse. Emotions flowed out of Mike in a way Will couldn't understand. Mike was the kind of person to wear his heart on his sleeve, and Will often thought that was just a part of Mike's enchanting charisma. Mike turned to El with pleading eyes. She gave him a small sympathetic smile as she effortlessly snapped her to the side, Mike's locker bursting open before them as if a grenade had just exploded within it. Mike jumped back as the metal door swung at him. Mike stared at El and his face broke out into a genuine grin like an open book, the story of his undying love for El written across every page. Max suddenly stomped up behind Eleven, breaking the moment as she scoffed, "Idiots."

"So you're telling me that your house is haunted because one door shut from what was probably air pressure," Lucas clarified with a critical eye on Dustin as the two boys walked up to join the group.

"No. I'm telling you, it wasn't air pressure. It was definitely a ghost." Dustin defended. El's eyes grew wide as his extreme hand gestures nearly smacked her in the face. Max rolled her eyes at the two as Dustin explained, "The door closed, I felt a gust of wind, and then my hat flew off, and *you're* telling *me* that it was *air pressure*?"

El shared a look with Mike and Will felt the warmth of a smile searing across his lifeless face. Will could feel himself fading. His mind drifted away to a place that didn't exist, and suddenly he was no longer present in the world, save physically. The universe seemed so dull and pointless compared to the electric galaxies Will spun in his tortured brain. He found himself drowning in his own existence, being dragged further and further under by a whirlpooling hand as his friends stood unaware at the surface. Will was suddenly thrust out of the ocean of this thought by the panic of an unfamiliar touch on his low back. He frantically glanced to his left with wide eyes to see Richie Tozier had wandered up beside him.

"Richie, what do you think you're doing?" Mike quizzed, annoyance dripping from his soft lips like golden honey that stuck to every word. It was clear Mike had no faith in Richie's intentions. Will began looking back and forth the two cousins curiously. He observed how Richie squinted at Mike despite the impossible strong

prescription of his glasses. Mike's arms hung at his sides where he was clenching and unclenching his fists as he narrowed his eyes and stepped forward into a combative stance. The goofy grin Richie had plastered on his face as he faced Mike's hostile posture was as confusing as it was ludicrous, and somehow Will couldn't take his eyes away.

"I just came to say hi to my good friend Will here," Richie responded in feigned innocence as he snaked his arm around Will's waist and tugged the boy's petite body in close to his lanky and scrawny figure. Will felt his heart stop for a moment as he collided with Richie's side. He felt the need to smack his chest with his fist just to get the dumb organ beating again after the terror he felt at Richie's unpredictable behavior. Will felt a slight tickling warmth in his side where Richie's hand was locked and found himself uncomfortably tensing at Richie's touch.

"Knock it off, Richie," Mike warned, staring Richie dead in the eyes as he tightened his fists until his knuckles turned white. The disdain in Mike's features told Will this was no empty threat.

"Not me, señor! No mäs. I have done nothing," Richie insisted in his Pancho Vanilla voice, taking a playful hand to his sternum in false offense at the accusation.

"Richie, I'm tired of this," Mike wearily began. "Just because you found out Will's gay doesn't give you the right to treat him like an object to flirt and play with." Will was taken aback at being outed so casually. It was like an electric shock had been shot at him like a bullet and Will was suddenly jolted and incapacitated. He had come out already, of course, and in a small town like Hawkins word spread quickly, but to hear it come out of Mike's voice like that made him feel abnormal. He felt the attention of his friends being drawn and burning into his alabaster skin, and Will wanted nothing more in that moment that to dissolve out of existence.

"Hey fag," Will suddenly heard himself being called, turning his head over his left shoulder to look behind him, shaken and surprised to find Richie mirroring him. The action caused the two boys to be pulled in closer together, their chests converging. Will took a sharp inhale that shoved his ribs into Richie's staid figure as saw Troy and

James strolling down the hallway in their direction. “Get a room. That’s fucking disgusting,” Troy sneered as he approached the two boys.

“That’s not what your mom said when she blew me last night!” Richie yelled back, taking his arm off of Will’s waist and protectively straightening it out in front of the small boy as he took a step toward Troy and James.

“What did you just say to me?” Troy tested as he stepped so close to the Derry boy that Richie’s nose nearly pressed against Troy’s chest. Richie craned his head back to squint at Troy’s threatening face, the clear guilt for his uncontrollable trash mouth melting into his worried face.

“Nothing,” Richie lied, shaking his head as he dropped it. He looked so defeated as he stepped back from the snarling wolf-like boy, and Will found himself astonished.

“That’s what I thought,” Troy spat down into Richie’s face, knocking Richie back with his shoulder as he advanced victoriously. “Next time just do us all a favor and kill yourself, queer,” Troy mocked as he continued down the bustling hall, James following behind like a brainless shadow. Will saw Richie tense up, squeezing his eyes tightly shut and refusing to turn around. The scrawny Derry boy clamped his hands into fists so strained and tight Will thought hey might just turn purple and fall off. *Please don’t do it, Richie.* Will prayed.

“Go jerk off to a picture of yourself, you egotistic asshole!” Richie shouted as he pivoted over one foot. All Will saw was Richie’s eyes go wide before he found his wrist caught in a death grip as Richie dragged him down the busy morning hall. Richie’s Hawaiian shirt flapped behind him, brushing against Will’s stomach as they burst through the crowded high school hall at an alarming speed. Richie cut the corner short and Will found himself jolted as he hit the concrete wall with his shoulder, the pain shocking him into consciousness. Will tripped over the feet of one girl on her way to class, nearly falling and knocking Richie to the ground. A metallic taste began to bleed into the back of Will’s throat and he choked on the air as he attempted to inhale. He felt like he was breathing through a coffee stirrer. Will suddenly panicked as he realized he was

getting dizzy from the lack of oxygen.

“Richie?” Will squeaked, unsure if Richie could even hear him over the mania in his eyes. Richie was much too violent and distraught to be merely running from a school bully, and the hysteria he saw in the boy before him terrified Will. Will was sure Troy hadn’t chased them more than a few feet before deciding they weren’t worth the energy, still he peeked over his throbbing shoulder to see nothing but students wandering down the hall to their morning classes. Not seeing Troy should have been a relief to Will, but it only frightened him more. Richie was clearly trying to escape something that wasn’t there, and Will couldn’t let it go on any longer. He planted his feet into the tile floor and pulled away from Richie, sneakers squealing as the two boys were stopped in their tracks. He felt the skin of his wrist scream out in pain as it tore between his tugging and Richie’s death grip. Involuntary tears stung at his eyes as Will yelped, “Richie, you’re hurting me.”

Richie desperately jerked forward, swinging his head back to look at Will urging, “Come on, Eddie. It-” Suddenly the stone cut terror on Richie’s face melted away into confusion as he sadly looked into Will’s enormous eyes.

“Eddie?” Will echoed quietly, perplexed by the vague conflict swimming in Richie’s deep brown eyes as he stared at Will. Suddenly Richie shook his head as if to clear it and let go of Will’s wrist, running the newly free hand through his dark curly hair to reveal his fraught expression. Will glanced down at his rubescent arm, eyes locking on the tiny red dots growing like deadly colonies under his skin where the blood vessels had broken. His nerves were electric, zapping sharp shooting pains up his forearm like it was a Tesla coil. Slowly, Will lifted his face from the growing evidence of damage to look at the boy who had caused it. He wasn’t angry or scared. Will couldn’t understand it, but he found himself growing calm. The horror written across the scrawny boy’s face looked so familiar and it put Will at ease to watch Richie tremble at the fingertips as he struggled to breathe. Will was entranced by the beauty and it made him feel psychotic. He couldn’t move. He just stood motionless, staring at Richie falling apart like a mirror as the students began to clear the hall around him. The morning bell blared in Will’s ears and

Richie looked up at the sound. The atmosphere was transformed. Richie began taking clumsy steps, wordlessly wandering past Will. After a deep breath, Will glanced back to watch Richie gracelessly turn the corner like he was lost and didn't know where he was. For a moment, Will wondered if Richie was crazy, and a tiny smile began to pull at the corner of his mouth.

3. Chapter Three

Cold wind snapped at Will's soft cheeks, turning them into blossoming roses against his snowy white skin as he crossed the lifeless high school parking lot. His eyes began to itch as the sharp air dried them, causing him to blink wildly. Will shoved his icy hands deep into the lint-filled pockets of Jonathan's old blue denim jacket as he nuzzled his face into the soft coffee-colored lining. He drew in a deep breath of November air and found the soft earthy scent polluted with traces of sweet smoke. Mindlessly, Will rounded the corner of the physical education building and traced the brick wall with his numb fingertips as he wandered down the narrow alley. He found Richie sat on the cold cement ground, lost in his own melancholic thoughts as he stared at the red brick wall before him and blew a swirling grey cloud into the sweeping wind. Will found a sense of calm washing over his mind as he slid his back down the biting cold wall and took his place next to the pensive boy. Wordlessly, Richie held the burning cigarette toward Will, unaware of the hot ash falling off the glowing end into the dull space between them. Will eagerly pulled the slim from Richie's loose grip and desperately took a long drag. As the nicotine latched onto his aching brain and broke apart the tension, Will closed his eyes in blissful relief before exhaling the cooling smoke and releasing a worthless wisp into the whispering air.

Will looked at Richie's stone face, the tortures of the day carved into the angles of every feature. Will held the cigarette out to the Derry boy for a moment, but Richie was like a statue. He made no move to take it and Will simply brought the withering stick back to his chapped lips for another sip of sickly nicotine as he tried to figure out what exactly brought him here.

They had been in third-period math class struggling to sort out the complicated equation written on the dusty blackboard at the front of the class. Ms Roswell sat at the front of the class, scribbling dooming marks of red pen on yesterday's homework. Her tired old eyes glanced up between each page, peering through her massive glasses at each student as she waited for the opportunity to discipline the first to step out of line. Will stressed over the complex math problem, tugging at his hair as he reread all the numbers and signs and tried to

figure out exactly what they meant. He looked up from his empty scratch paper and his eyes landed on the back of Richie's head. The Derry boy sat at the front of the class in the second row, and to Will's surprise, Richie was sitting up straight twirling his pencil between the fingers of his right hand with a paper full of silver pencil scratches simply sitting on his desk. He hadn't realized Richie was so good at math. There was a lot Will didn't know about Richie. The small boy's grip tightened on his pencil in stress and he began to realize that his inability to solve the problem may have less to do with the intricacy of the problem and more to do with how he felt like pulling his hair out over all Richie's puzzle pieces that didn't fit together.

Will finally caved into his fretting and leaned over the obtrusive bar that attached his desk to his chair. Beside him, Mike was so focused on the math problem at hand he couldn't have been more than a few inches from shoving his nose into the paper. Mike's furrowed brow and parted lips told Will his friend was completely invested, and yet Will couldn't help himself anymore.

"Mike, who's Eddie?" Will begged quietly, his eyes flicking cautiously toward Ms Roswell. The name had been pounding around Will's racing mind all week. Anything genuine about Richie Tozier was locked behind a fortress of offensive jokes and bad impressions, yet the name clearly meant something to Richie, and Will desperately wanted to know what.

Mike's eyes didn't leave their focus on the leaf of paper he was ferociously scribbling over as he carelessly answered, "Just some guy Richie used to have a huge crush on." Will felt a jolt in his chest as he wondered how Mike could toss out something so private about his cousin so nonchalantly. It didn't even stir his focus on the math problem. Suddenly the sound of pencil scratches seemed too loud for the hushed voices of the murmuring classroom. Will attempted to shake off his paranoia and refocus on the equation before him, but he still couldn't get rid of the slithering whispers all around him. They snaked across the unforgiving room like poison.

"Eddie, huh?" The taunting voice broke the muttering room to silence as Will's head snapped up in terror. James stood over Richie's desk where the Derry boy was hunched over his tight fists. His knuckles were white as death and Will thought he could see the red fury

burning in Richie's eyes even from the back of his head. The entire room was still for a moment as they waited to see what Richie would do when he finally went off.

Without warning Richie slammed his notebook shut and clumsily jumped up, loudly shoving the heavy desk as he banged his leg into it. Once he caught his deficient balance, Richie instantly spun around on one flimsy foot, yelling a broken, "Mike!" back at his cousin. Will was petrified by the red blood warming Richie's steaming face. The light behind his conflicted eyes had grown dim and the hurt of betrayal gnawed at the boy's cracking voice. As he grabbed his notebook, Richie accidentally shoved away the yellow pencil left beside it. Will watched the wooden stick roll off the worn desk as it fell to the feet of his jeering classmates. The pencil raced to hide under the heating vent as Richie stormed out of the classroom in the opposite direction, battered pack of cigarettes peeking out of his denim pocket. Will turned to look at Mike in desperation, and all he found was fear written into his best friend's eyes and a confession of guilt hanging off his pale lips.

Ms Rowell staggered to her feet and tromped across the animated classroom to the open door. "Richie Tozier!" She shrilled down the hall after the fleeing boy. "Richie Tozier, you come back here!" Her shrieking voice cut through Will's head and suddenly the environment of the dreadful classroom had become too tense. He felt his pulse growing faster and faster, beating against his tight throat as he panicked. Will was already out in the hallway before he realized he'd even left his seat. His school work was left frozen on his desk like a Polaroid picture as Will calmly walked down the empty halls. The villainous screams of his teacher behind him faded into white noise as he set out to find the only person who had ever come so close to understanding Will's tortured life.

"You're gay?" Will asked Richie as he passed off the dwindling cigarette. It was more of an affirmation than a question.

"Yeah," the Derry boy responded before anxiously taking a long drag.

After a beat, Will responded lightly, "Me too." Richie turned his face to blow intoxicating smoke into the small boy's face and the smell tickled Will's nose as he euphorically inhaled the beautiful polluted

air from Richie's lungs.

Richie turned back to face the wall as he slowly returned the slim to his lips. The toxic cloud puffed out of his mouth and was immediately swept away by the relentless wind. "You wanna make out?" Richie asked mindlessly as he stared at the maroon bricks before him.

Will felt the shock at the obscene proposal knocking at his chest and forcefully pushed it down to his stomach. "Yeah," Will responded casually, desperate to allow himself to be senseless. Will turned to face the scrawny boy beside him, anxiously waiting for a reaction.

Richie drew on the cigarette one last time before the smoke followed the words, "Me too," out of his soft lips.

Suddenly, Richie jumped on top of Will and pressed his damp lips to Will's parched mouth. Richie's bony arms swung around Will's fragile neck and suddenly Will heard a sickening hiss. He was met with searing pain just to the left of his spine. Wincing away Will yelped, taking in a sharp breath as Richie pulled away in confusion. Quickly, the small boy reached across his fragile body to touch the blistering skin, closing his eyes tightly at the burning sensation of the contact.

"Sorry," Richie said, causing Will to open his eyes and watch the Derry boy stub out the last of the cigarette on the brick wall beside them. Richie tossed the tan butt over his shoulder and tentatively scooted closer to Will's tiny form. "Can I see?" he asked gently. Will felt chills soaring over his burning flesh as Richie stared at him with pure honesty shining deep in those brown eyes. Slowly, Will brought his trembling hand from the burn on his neck as Richie leaned forward. His curly hair brushed the shell of Will's ear as Richie examined the fresh injury. Cold, bony fingers brushed across Will's neck and slid up into his hair, cradling the back of his head and sending electric pulses through every hair follicle they stimulated. Mindlessly, Will leaned into the soothing hand, exposing the burn to the frigid air before Richie's hot breath came beating down and sent trembles racing through the small boy's body.

Will felt Richie's apologetic lips carefully lock onto the nearby skin at the corner of his shoulder and neck, a stark contrast to the throbbing of the fresh injury. Chills ran down Will's spine and his eyes fluttered

shut in ecstasy. He slowly turned his head as Richie's dewy lips brushed across his tender jaw and landed on Will's thirsty mouth. He found himself moving his weak hand to Richie's right cheek, feeling the steady movement of the kiss through every sensitive fingertip. Richie's glasses smudged against Will's cheekbone and mindlessly Will gripped their arms and lifted them over Richie's angular head, landing behind the boy's neck and fervently pulling him closer. The taste of tobacco swam between their tongues and Will drowned in the titillating scent of Richie's unwashed hair. Richie's leg brushed against Will's frozen knee as the boy pulled his lanky figure forward, dragging himself into Will's tiny lap. Skinny legs grabbed onto Will's hips and narrow feet pressed into his tense back. Their chests pushed up against each other and Will could hear their hearts beating like a bass drum building below the orchestra.

"HEY!" roared a voice behind them, startling Will as he tore away from Richie and snapped his head around to find crotchety old Mr Cooper stumbling toward them as fast as he could. "Hey, Queers!" Sheer panic struck Will in the chest like a dull knife. Quickly, he dropped Richie's glasses back onto the boys face, not caring about the crooked and useless position they had fallen into. Will shoved the flustered boy off of him and jumped to his feet so quickly it burned his useless muscles. He grabbed Richie's slender fingers and tugged the graceless boy to his wobbly feet. Will began to run relentlessly, dragging Richie's stumbling form behind. His feet pounded into the paved ground with such force, pain shot up his leg with every stride. The lining of his jacket painfully rubbed back and forth over the blistering burn on Will's raw neck with every dreadful pace. Richie felt like dead weight behind him and annoyance began to bubble up beneath Will's terror as the two raced down the empty suburban streets like they were escaping a war. Empty cars and lonely homes flew by behind them as they pressed forward, despite knowing Mr Cooper was an elderly tyrant who couldn't have chased the two young boys further than the edge of campus. Still, the pulsating adrenaline of fear urged them forward, and they didn't stop until they were standing outside the Wheeler's house.

Will stopped suddenly and dropped Richie's hand. His shocked muscles gave out beneath him and Will fell into the dead grass of the Wheeler's front lawn violently coughing. His lungs burned with every

hack, like a swarm of fire ants were attacking him from the inside. Above him, Richie dropped his hands to his knees as he gasped for air. A dainty suburban woman with a delicate stroller eventually walked past the two on the pristine residential sidewalk, giving the two boys a critical eye as she silently shielded her baby. She walked quickly as though the breathless posed a threat, hurrying to the end of the block and hurriedly turning around the corner in her panic. Richie began to breathe normally and carefully laid himself on the ground next to Will, turning to his side and propping himself up on a sharp elbow so he could observe the small boy struggling to push his chest out. Will felt like there was a brick on his sternum and it took a conscious effort for him to breathe.

As Will wheezed, Richie smiled and commented, “You’re a lot like Eds, you know.” Will moved his curious eyes to the joyous Derry boy as he struggled to push his ribcage out and inhale. “Eddie has asthma,” Richie continued as he turned onto his back, placing his hands behind his head as he stared up at the cloudy grey sky. “I used to carry around a spare aspirator just because his lungs were so shit.” Will heard a light and genuine laugh come from Richie’s steady chest and it warmed his frosty cheeks. Richie quieted and Will found himself resolute in the solitude of the hushed breeze. It seemed so out of character for Richie to just silently exist in the world next to Will without having to announce himself by some mischievous means, but Will thought this was the true Richie, despite its rarity. Finally free from fear, respiration grew easier for Will. “So are you coming back tonight for Mike?” Richie inquired, breaking the silence. “I mean, I just know you guys have that Friday thing,” the boy trailed off as he sat up.

“I don’t know,” Will answered truthfully. It had been a strange and adventurous day, and he wasn’t sure he could handle facing his friends, not to mention the chances that his mother would ground him the moment she got the call that he’d skipped class.

Richie nodded and stood from the decaying ground, dusting off the bits of dried leaf from his jeans. The boy’s long Chuck Taylor’s approached Will, and Richie outstretched a scrawny arm to Will. Will took one last deep breath before taking Richie’s slender fingers and allowing the lanky boy to help pull him up from the dry grass. Will

stood quickly and grabbed Richie's shoulders to steady himself as he stumbled over his own feet.

"I guess I'll maybe see you tonight then," Richie offered as he awkwardly backed away from Will toward the house. Will simply nodded and watched the gangly boy wobble up to the ever unlocked front door of the Wheeler's house and let himself in. Will waited for the door to be fully shut before turning his back on the pretty suburban house. He began numbly walking through the identical little houses with their pampered lawns. It was almost funny to see such perfect homes it looked as though no one lived in them. They were simply works of art in a gallery for the pleasure of the rich and privileged. It was the kind of normal Will could never be.

Cold fear stirred in Will's stomach like an ice storm as he trudged away from the lifeless suburbs. He took a mind-clearing breath of the fresh air, banishing his worries to tomorrow. The fragrance of dewy leaves and damp soil saturated Will's head and brought new life to his sore muscles as he wandered down Mirkwood. The wind was cold and it caused Will's nose to tickle as a small drop dribbled down his nostril. He pulled the sleeve of his jacket over his thumb and wiped away the mucous from his face before tightly crossing his arms over his chest for warmth in the growing cold of the day. Will glanced up at the warm light of the pale gold sun. It hit his face in spots through the shadows of the tall autumn trees. Every step ached in his tired feet, and Will found himself pushing forward for the comfort of home. The journey seemed so much longer when he was alone on foot, and he longed for the freedom he felt and the comfort El provided when they biked together. It brought him back to the simplicity of his childhood with the party before all the trauma.

Will felt a weight release him when he finally reached the long dirt drive up to his house. The boy kicked tiny pebbles below his tired feet as he strolled down the driveway. Will grew confused when he found Hopper's truck parked out front his house. It looked so strange sitting there alone in its mud-covered majesty. His weathered house looked like a criminal's shack behind the intimidating "Hawkins Police Department" logo on the side. Will's head snapped up at the familiar sound of old hinges squeaking. The old door slowly opened to reveal Hopper's gruff face and an outreached hand with a single

chubby finger beckoning Will in.

“We need to talk,” he pronounced in a tone Will couldn’t decipher before Hopper turned his back, allowing the door to swing open behind him. Will suddenly became very aware of his stuttered breathing, choking on a harsh swallow as he felt the color drain out of his face. Nervously, the small boy jogged up to the door of his tattered home, gravel grinding under his worn tennis shoes. Will locked out the violent cold wind behind him as he slammed the weightless door shut. He turned from the exit to see Hopper standing in the kitchen, casually leaning against the far counter. Will couldn’t see the man’s face under the large, downturned hat of his khaki uniform and he felt himself sinking at the unusual posture Hopper was exhibiting. Will felt like he was shrinking and yet unable to disappear.

“I got a call at the police station today,” the large man mentioned casually. “It was Mr Cooper from the high school. He was fuming over some obscene behavior by a couple students. You know anything about that?” Hopper paused and looked up at Will with an upturned eyebrow like he was in an interrogation. Will cast his eyes to the floor as his rapid heartbeat began pulsing cold blood through hot veins. His lips were dry and stuck together and Will felt as though his vocal chords had been ripped from his throat. “Well, then Flo told me your mother had called. You know, she’s terrified because apparently you cut class and nobody had a clue where you were.” Hopper stopped speaking and leaned back on the counter behind him, eyeing Will expectantly.

“We didn’t do anything,” Will mumbled. He felt like black blood was dripping from his lying lips and he could taste the metallic poison coating his tongue.

“I’m a cop kid,” Hopper stated gruffly. “Finding the truth is my job. Don’t lie to me.”

“I’m not!” Will claimed defensively before Hopper shouted over him.

“I said stop lying to me!” Will shrunk back at the loud shouting. Yelling always brought him back to the heartache of his parents arguing and made Will feel like a defenseless child again.

“We just went out for a smoke,” Will admitted quietly in a broken voice, not wanting to listen to any more of Hopper’s pointed accusations.

“In the middle of class?” Hopper quizzed, suspicion hanging off every syllable. Will looked up at the large man silently, his eyes begging the torture to stop. Hopper began walking slowly toward Will as he voiced his next point of attack. “Cooper used to catch your mother and I sharing my cigarettes between 5th and 6th period all the time and we never had the police knocking at our doors.”

Heartlessly, Will insisted, “We were just smoking.”

“Kid, I just want to know where you’ve been!” Hopper begged as he stopped a foot away from Will, towering over the petrified boy. Will felt his fear turn into anger. He didn’t like being persecuted like this and he was prepared to say anything to make Hopper stop.

“I kissed a boy, okay?!” Will blurted out, wanting nothing more than to be done with this conversation. “Is that what you want to know?” Hopper took a tiny step back, silently watching Will’s breakdown. “I’m gay. I’m a disgusting fag and I got caught.” Will felt the tears stinging in his eyes as he continued to unravel before the only father figure he’d ever known. “I know I’m broken,” his voice began disappearing before he could finish, “but I’m begging you please don’t try to fix me.” Will blinked and at last the water welling in his enormous eyes rained down his face in large drops. Despite the blurry vision, Will continued to stare at Hopper, desperately holding his ground.

Will gasped in surprise and choked on his tears as Hopper reached out and pulled Will’s trembling body to his large chest in a warm hug. Will coughed until he was sobbing into the man’s comforting chest. “It’s okay, kid,” Hopper insisted as he carefully rubbed Will’s tense back with a large bear hand. Tentatively, Will lifted his hands to wrap them thankfully around Hopper’s beer belly. The comfort he felt was a strange sensation that he’d never experienced with Lonnie. It was an unguarded act of paternal love Will was unprepared for, and though he appreciated it, it made Will uncomfortable. Snot threatened to drip from Will’s nose to Hopper’s uniform and the small boy sniffled before pulling away.

Will felt defeated and exhausted. To have a fragile bird yanked out of him like a violent raptor was grinding Will's frail bones to dust and he no longer had the strength to stand. He weakly pulled out a chair from the table beside him and clumsily sat down on the hard wood. He hadn't ever dreamed this would be how he came out to his family. Will heard Hopper's heavy steps and watched the burly man out of the corner of his eye as the officer slowly walked around the table and assumed his place in his usual breakfast chair. The room was quiet and the air was tense. Will stared at the table, trying to avoid prolonging this relentless conversation. Hopper's chair squeaked as the large man adjusted, leaning forward on the table. Will's head snapped up when Hopper finally spoke.

"I used to think that being gay was a crime against nature," Hopper stated, and Will stared at the man with cautious intrigue. "I couldn't understand how a man could deny himself the pleasures of a woman." Will had a strange feeling that Hopper was unsuccessfully trying to be supportive, but they both knew the man was digging himself into a hole. Hopper pinched the bridge of his nose with swollen fingers, closing his eyes tightly. He took a deep breath before attempting to begin again. "My daughter Sarah was taken from me. I never really understood her, but I loved her with every cell in my body. When she died, I lost my whole world. Then your mother came back into my life, and when she spoke about finding you I saw that same unforgiving love only a parent can know. Before I knew it there were other dimensions, and monsters, and things that I can't even begin to understand," Hopper looked at Will hopefully, thinking he had made his point. Will returned nothing but a blank stare, unable to comprehend how all of this was relevant. Hopper sighed and sat back in his chair. "Kid, I guess what I'm trying to say is that the world is strange. The love I felt for my daughter, the same love I feel for El, and now for your mother and you and your brother... it's the only thing I know about the world."

Will nodded slowly, finally beginning to understand what Hopper couldn't put into words. He felt, in a way, resolute. A calm washed over him as a smile of freedom grew at Will's lips. The old man reflected the smile as they shared an understanding. Will could imagine this was the joy of having a father, and it made his thoughts run wild. Suddenly he picked out one statement of Hopper's

acceptance and couldn't help himself. "So you love my mom?" Will tested, the smile on his face growing as he caught Hopper off guard.